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The Identity-Extremism Nexus:  
Countering Islamist Extremism in the West

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Program on  
Extremism

## **Program on Extremism**

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

## **About the Author**

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*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.*

## **Abstract**

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives in Europe have existed for much longer than those in the United States (US). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as in select countries in Asia, several rehabilitation and de-radicalization programs have been established with the aim of reintegrating former Islamist militants into society.<sup>1</sup> Despite making some progress in understanding the phenomenon, many of these countries have not succeeded in stemming the tide of extremism, as witnessed by the unprecedented number of foreign fighters—including a growing number of women and girls—traveling to join the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The fact that the threat is now a combination of homegrown terrorist attacks and traveling, and potentially returning, foreign fighters has complicated matters further. States must now contend with a jihadist threat that has eclipsed that of al Qaeda's in its social media savvy and, more importantly, its control of territory. Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda associates may have often talked of erecting "Islamic" states and the caliphate; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi seems to have partially realized one.

What has become apparent from following Western discourse on violent extremism is that there remains much confusion on how radicalization actually happens. While academics and practitioners have made ground in understanding the dynamics of radicalization, there are still many questions left unanswered.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the partially religious nature of the phenomenon adds an additional level of complexity, as the debate on the religion-ideology nexus is subjected to political censors and considerations, thus hindering progress. The sensitivity is understandable, and the focus on Islam has had real negative repercussions for Muslims. While religion is central to the debate on Islamist extremism, other factors crucial to processes of radicalization demand more serious consideration. One of these factors, and the focus of this report, is the role of identity in radicalization.

Many scholars of political violence are by now aware of the role identity plays in radicalization, regardless of whether radicalization leads to violence. An overview of mainstream models of radicalization also shows that identity dynamics lie at the heart of the process.<sup>3</sup> This essay provides an overview of how identity relates to Islamist-inspired radicalization. The aim here is twofold. First, the essay highlights issues relevant to the identity-radicalization debate, and their relation to extremism. Then, drawing from this discussion, it develops a number of points to consider for those considering developing community-based rehabilitation and de-radicalization initiatives. The essay refers primarily to Western democratic contexts, and by no means covers the scope of the discussion on radicalization.

The findings can be summarized as follows:

- The inclusion of parents and vulnerable target groups is integral to the success of CVE efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamed El-Said, *De-Radicalising Islamists: Programmes and Their Impact in Muslim Majority States*, London,

<sup>2</sup>, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalization in Europe: What we know and what we do not know." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 797-814.

<sup>3</sup> Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23 (2011): 602-622.

- There is a need for role models to counter the “jihadi cool” identity promoted by Islamist extremist countercultures.
- “It takes a network to defeat a network.” In CVE this means creating a wide network of partners from the grassroots to the state-level, as opposed to few select organizations that are not representative of all stakeholders involved.
- Government officials working in relevant fields should be involved in community efforts, with the aim of fostering trust and dialogue among all those involved in CVE efforts.
- Developing counter-*argumentation* composed of a political counter-narrative and a religious counter-theology is key to the process of countering violent extremism.

## **"It's identity, stupid."**

Borrowing from Shiraz Maher's June 2015 article in *The Guardian* "The roots of radicalization? It's identity, stupid," this section starts with what is perhaps one of the most important points on the issue of radicalization and extremism: extremist ideologies, regardless of their motivational underpinnings, are effective because of the *functions* they serve their adherents.<sup>4</sup>

In their seminal work on identity, James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine explain how the nature of social organization in many modern Western countries contributes to the postponement of identity development in youth: "As humans have attempted to adapt to modern and late modern forms of social organization, where choice has replaced obligation as the basis of self-definition, identity formation has become a more difficult, precarious, and solitary process for which many people are unprepared."<sup>5</sup> In a globalized world, this process is further complicated, as the bases for self-definition have multiplied as a result of the intermingling of cultures and ideas facilitated by the proliferation of global communication technologies. While many are able to successfully negotiate conflicting identity claims, those who cannot do so face significant challenges that have the potential to trigger an identity crisis.

One of the ways in which people respond to identity confusion is through seeking out groups whose ideologies offer a clearer sense of direction and stricter guidelines for how to think and behave. Extremist ideologies are especially effective in this respect because they are based on the exact kind of strict guidelines that are useful for filling such identity voids. Such ideologies provide a comfortable mold into which individuals suffering from identity crises can easily fit. Individuals are relieved of the burden of choice, and of the uncertainty that arises from having to decide between opposing identity claims.<sup>6</sup> When the existing social context no longer offers meaningful reference points for formulating identity, people start searching elsewhere. Further, the collectivist spirit of most extremist ideologies invokes a sense of belonging that is increasingly absent in the age of the nuclear family and globalization.

For those Muslims who comprise minority groups in the West, several factors specific to their dispositions can further aggravate the identity formulation process. The following is an overview of identity-related dynamics specific to Muslims in Western diaspora contexts that have the potential to drive identity crises and create dispositions susceptible to radicalization.

### *Generational schisms*

One of the main challenges many Western Muslim youth face during the process of identity formulation is reconciling the traditional lifestyle of their parents' generations with that of the secular, democratic societies in which they live.<sup>7</sup> In Europe, older generations, namely parents

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<sup>4</sup> Shiraz Maher, "The roots of radicalization? It's identity, stupid," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 436-454. See also Arie Kruglanski, "Psychology not Theology: Overcoming ISIS' Secret Appeal," *E-International Relations*, October 28, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For a European example see Matenia Sirseloudi, "The Meaning of Religion and Identity for the Violent Radicalisation of the Turkish Diaspora in Germany," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 815-817.

and grandparents, tend to continue to live by the conservative religious and cultural practices and traditions with which they were raised. This is potentially problematic because such practices and traditions offer weak role models for identity formation due to their incompatibility with the values and norms of mainstream Western societies. Whereas the latter place heavy emphasis on individual choice in formulating identity, the conservative practices of older generations continue to push traditionally prescribed roles (e.g. familial, gender, etc.). This contradiction can create significant challenges in negotiating an identity that accommodates the best of both worlds, so to speak, and can result in Muslim youth rejecting both cultures in favor of a counterculture.<sup>8</sup>

These generational schisms do not cause a problem if they are only peripheral to the identity formation process. Further, conservatism (religious or otherwise) and tradition do not necessarily hinder active participation in society or the ability of youth to more selectively formulate their own identities. However, there are cases where such practices can be especially restraining, particularly when strong norm enforcement mechanisms exist within families and communities.

Here, the problem lies in young peoples' limited opportunities to participate in society due to restraints imposed by the family and/or community. In communities where families continue to abide by traditional patriarchal honor codes, the onus of societal control falls more heavily on women and girls. Though not a direct contributor to radicalization *per se*, such restraints may create an effectual disconnect from society and sustain negative feelings of non-belonging and disaffection. In some cases, this disconnect is exacerbated by real or perceived discrimination experienced in society. Unable to glean a sense of purpose from either their families or larger society, Muslims may turn inwards in the search for answers.

In a recent article, Norwegian film director and human rights activist Deeyah Khan makes similar observations regarding the women who join ISIS:

Although Hitler's roles for women were limited to Kinder, Küche, Kirche (children, kitchen, church), almost half of the votes he gained were from women. They preferred a model of gender relations that allowed them a degree of domestic autonomy and status as wives and mothers – if nothing else. Indeed, some Muslim women in the [United Kingdom] already live under circumstances almost as constrained as in Islamic State due to the restrictions of family "honour." For these women, Islamic State presents a route of escape. Some who seek to counter parental controls may turn to scripture, to use a language that carries weight within their households.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of joining ISIS as a means of emancipation from societal and familial restraints has recently been suggested elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Choosing to travel to serve what they perceive as a higher cause comes with the added appeal of agency.

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<sup>8</sup> Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, "Viewing Jihadism as a counterculture: potential and limitations," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 7, no. 1 (2015): 3-17.

<sup>9</sup> Deeyah Khan, "For Isis women, it's not about 'jihadi brides': it's about escape," *The Guardian*, June 20, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For example Michael Curtis, "Women on the March to Islamism," *American Thinker*, March 5, 2015. See also Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," *Dissent* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 118-125.

The dangers here are apparent. Families that do not enjoy a norm of open and active dialogue with their children, even on the topic of religion, are ill suited to act as firewalls to extremist ideas. As a follower of former UK jihadi recruiter Abu Muntasir laments, "If they [Muslim children] have to be repressed about sex, about their friendships, who are they going to talk to? It makes them exposed and vulnerable."<sup>11</sup>

The Internet serves as a largely uncensored, unmonitored platform, providing a plethora of virtual social identities from which youth can choose. It is in precisely this realm that Islamist extremist propaganda abounds.

### *Society*

In all of the cases mentioned above, as with all cases of radicalization to both non-violent and violent extremism, the process is the outcome of several convergent factors. For example, one of the earliest reports on radicalization in the West, prepared by the New York Police Department Intelligence Division in 2007, broadly categorizes the potential triggers of radicalization as economic, social, political, and personal.<sup>12</sup> These broad categories still hold true today. In each case of radicalization, an event or sequence of events, falling broadly under one of more of these categories, can be significant enough to prompt soul searching and the embrace of alternative life paths, one of which could be extremism.

In his autobiography *Radical*, UK-based Quilliam Foundation co-founder and chairman Maajid Nawaz explains the racial discrimination he was subjected to as a British citizen of Pakistani origin. Nawaz eventually joined the Islamist extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT).<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that Nawaz's initial response to racial discrimination—a social trigger—was to seek out an alternative social identity that better spoke to, and represented, his grievances. The “B-boy” subculture into which Nawaz was drawn, based on a rejection of police and society, served as a coping mechanism in the face of violent discrimination at the hands of neo-Nazi militants and the police. However, the real moment of empowerment came during a specific altercation with members of the British neo-Nazi organization Combat 18:

What I realized was that when I asked Mickey [neo-Nazi] why they started on us, he looked at me and talked to me in a different way. He was no longer *looking down at me*. He was in fact scared. And that came from the assertive new identity Osman [Nawaz's brother] had adopted. *Islamism....* I caught a glimpse of its *power*, and how it was capable of transforming my stand at a stroke.<sup>14</sup> [Emphasis added]

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<sup>11</sup> Tracy McVeigh, "'Recruiter' of UK jihadis: I regret opening the way to ISIS," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," New York, NY, New York City Police Department, [http://www.nypdshield.org/public/SiteFiles/documents/NYPD\\_Report-Radicalization\\_in\\_the\\_West.pdf](http://www.nypdshield.org/public/SiteFiles/documents/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> For more on HuT see Surinder Jumar Sharma, "Hizb-Ut-Tahrir: The New Islamic State," *Counter-Terrorism Exchange* 5, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>14</sup> Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey from Islamist Extremism to Democratic Awakening*, (United Kingdom: WH Allen, 2012), 77-78.

The italicized text above more or less summarizes how Islamism served the most basic and important of identity functions. Nawaz was tired of feeling inferior. Buying into the ideology of Islamism provided him with a new and empowered sense of self, in contradistinction to the negative identity he had previously occupied. Identifying with Islamism boosted Nawaz's self-esteem and (perceived) standing among both his neo-Nazi enemies and society at large. This positive sense of self is perhaps one of the most important functions of identities, even when associated with an extremist ideology.

The context and social settings that provided the background to Nawaz's radicalization are very different today, both in the UK and in other Western countries. While discrimination continues to be a reality for some, governments have continually implemented checks and balances to prevent both the emergence and re-emergence of a variety of forms of institutional discrimination.

### *The Apolitical Religious Influence: Salafism*

Outside the family, sources of religious education, including Islamic community councils and mosques, may also play an important role in either challenging or contributing to radicalization. Although much less acute in the US, one of the main problems Europe has faced is the proliferation of mosques and Islamic seminaries founded on Salafi interpretations of Islam.

The Salafi strand of Islam follows a puritanical, fundamentalist interpretation of the religion that, generally speaking, defines strict parameters for what constitutes proper Islamic practice. Its creed can be summarized by the Arabic term *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty [to Muslims] and disavowal [to non-Muslims]),<sup>15</sup> and thus actively discourages the intermingling of Muslims with people of different faiths save for certain, necessary situations. What's more, because Salafis perceive themselves as the "saved sect," Muslims who do not adhere to their understanding of Islam are viewed as inferior and errant in faith.<sup>16</sup> The notion of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* is supported by a worldview that conceives of the world as composed of distinct abodes, those that are Islamic and those that are not. Following from terminology found in the scripture, those un-Islamic areas of the world collectively represent the abode of war, or *dar al-harb*. It should come as no surprise then that the notion of armed jihad occupies a central role in most sub-strands of Salafism, and that it is from this school of thought that global jihadis—also commonly known as Salafi jihadis—draw their ideological inspiration.

Borrowing from Quintan Wiktorowicz's categorization, Salafis can be understood as falling into one of three strands: the "purist," the "politico," and the "jihadi,"<sup>17</sup> of which the former is quietist and the latter two are distinctly political. For the sake of simplifying the terminology, the latter two can be grouped under the "Islamist" umbrella (and will be referred to as such henceforth), with the jihadi strand representing the most violent and extremist manifestation of the ideology.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent read on how the Salafist doctrine influences Islamist extremist mainstream narratives, see Joas Wagmekers, "Framing the 'Threat to Islam': Al-Wala' wa al-Bara' in Salafi Discourse," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2008), 1-22.

<sup>16</sup> The most extreme manifestation of the Salafist school of thought, the Salafi-Jihadi stream, goes even further in condemning non-Salafi practices by apostatizing those that reject the Salafi creed.

<sup>17</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006), 207-39.

Although quietist Salafis do not promote activism per se, the religious identity they promote fails to equip Muslim followers, particularly youth, with the social and religious skillsets required to function in Western contexts. Instead of promoting coexistence, religious tolerance, and compromise, they promote religious isolation and distrust. The surrounding society is painted as morally corrupt, sinful, and infidel (a term loaded with derogatory connotations in the Islamic lexicon), yet the only corrective measure given to followers amounts to social cocooning and distancing from mainstream society. While some Salafi adherents are able to carve out social spaces in which they can live in parallel to the mainstream, not all are happy adopting such passive positions in society. In effect, Salafism can trigger feelings of non-belonging, and engenders a religious divide that has the potential to make individuals more susceptible to the kind of radical, politicized rhetoric of violent Islamist extremists.<sup>18</sup>

### *Politicization of Muslim Identity*

Islamism, in both its violent and non-violent forms, has long been present in many Muslim-majority countries.<sup>19</sup> This ideology, in its contemporary forms, emerged at the turn of the last century as a rebellion against the perceived decline of Islam and the ascendance of the nation-state as a replacement for Islamic structures, specifically the Ottoman Empire. Despite the existence of a variety of interpretations of Islamism as a political ideology (including those crossing sectarian lines), the central concept of the ideology revolves around a shared political agenda and vision. The goal of the movement's political agenda is the institution of a body of laws derived from and codified in Islamic scripture, the *shari'ah*, as the primary source of governance. Depending upon the Islamist collective in question, this agenda is meant only for Muslim-majority nation-states or represents a global endeavor, and can be violent ("jihadi"), non-violent ("politico"), or a combination of both.

Regardless of the nature of their agenda, many Islamists generally tend to be skeptical of Western systems of governance, particularly democracies, and many perceive them as being a front for Western cultural imperialism and a threat to Islam and Islamic religious identity. Select Islamist organizations will, at times, also actively work to promote societal cleavages along sectarian lines in order to successfully build Islamic constituencies favorable to their political agenda. The result of the said organizations' activism can, at a minimum, instill the "us vs. them" mentality among Muslims that similarly lies at the heart of more violent Islamist movements. It is for this reason that some studies perceive both quietist and jihadi Islamists to ideologically represent "two sides of the same coin."<sup>20</sup>

In Western contexts, the master narrative of Islamist extremists relies on the politicization of Muslim identity to achieve its goals. There are two main ways this politicization is achieved, both of which depend upon a strategy that aims at setting Muslims apart from the majority by emphasizing their adherence to a common faith that is allegedly under attack. In the first instance, Islamist extremists tap into cultural affinities that second and third-generation

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<sup>18</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, "Islamism in Europe," *World Watch Monitor*, N.d., p. 4-6.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent discussion on Islamism, see Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> For example Alex P. Schmid, *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – The Hague, May 2014.

immigrants may share with a native homeland, and then frame foreign policies of host nations as intentional affronts against the homeland within the framework of a holy war. In this instance, it is not the country per se that is being attacked, but the religion.<sup>21</sup>

Framing politics this way aims to sensitize Muslims to their religious identities in a manner intrinsically bound to politics. The more adherents internalize this political outlook, the more radicalization becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Trained to view the world through a religious “us vs. them” lens, each negative political event involving Muslims reinforces the initial belief. And so, instead of being able to critically evaluate events in their lives, Muslims are increasingly indoctrinated to view themselves as passive victims of a powerful conspiracy targeting their religion.

Through the use of social media, al Qaeda, and now ISIS, have tirelessly worked to tailor similar narratives to Western audiences. The messaging strategies differ and are context-specific, yet the bottom-line pushes the same rhetoric, namely that Muslims in the West are intentionally being targeted for *being Muslim* via specific domestic policies.<sup>22</sup>

It goes without saying that Muslim identity has been simultaneously politicized on both sides of the divide. Few topics have managed to both attract and hold the attention of international media as much as Islamist extremism. The fact that the phenomenon has continued to evolve into even more ruthless forms of violence has necessarily meant that Muslims and Islam have been pulled into the fray. The feeling, and sometimes fact, of being under constant scrutiny and judgment does a good job of putting Muslims in the West on the defensive; a position which helps create the exact kind of societal cleavages that extremists hope for.

### **On Ideology and Religion**

Ideology is crucial to the radicalization process, as it capitalizes on existing conditions to create its narratives, and thus its appeal. Without a successful storyline that plays on one or more elements of a person's identity, the ideology is unlikely to attract followers. More importantly, all extremist ideologies serve several social and psychological functions for their followers that capitalize on social ills and failures to strengthen their narratives.

That being said, when creating targeted interventions and CVE programs specific to Islamist extremism, practitioners should be cautious in downplaying the significance of religion. The most recent wave of Western-based foreign fighters has seen a diverse mix of increasingly younger men and women traveling to Syria and Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Those who travel abroad fall across the spectrum in respect to both knowledge of Islam and degree of religious fervor, from those who know little about Islam to those who make the trip specifically to fulfill what is perceived as a

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the master narratives of Islamist extremism see Jeffry H. Halverson, Steven R. Corman, and H.L. Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> For an example of how the narratives are framed from within a Western context, see Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar Al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad,” ICSR, September 11, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Briggs Obe and Tanya Silverman. *Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014.

religious obligation. Even when religion does not initially play a role, an important part of the indoctrination process is to instill a specific religiously motivated worldview in would-be recruits that justifies violence. In either case, writing off the ideological indoctrination as non-religious brainwashing overlooks a significant part of the problem.

Islam lacks a centralized authority structure that holds sway over all its followers. While there are centers of authority that act as religious points of reference (for example, Al-Azhar University in Egypt), no single institution reserves the right to impose its interpretation of Islam on Muslims. This flexibility can be positive in that it encourages believers to personally and more closely approach the texts. However, such flexibility leaves the same texts open to individual interpretation and, lacking the knowledge necessary for contextualization, their meanings and directions are taken at face value and in piecemeal fashion.

Many jihadis have drawn upon the wealth of stories and examples from Islamic texts to articulate their ideology. Here, the issue is not simply cherry picking violent verses to justify a political ideology. Rather, it is the transgressive emulation of a specific period within the history of Islam, combined with a mindset that divides the world along religious, sectarian lines. The Qur'anic verses that feature armed jihad, or *qital*, correspond primarily to the Medinian period of Muhammad's life. During the initial phase of his proselytization mission in Mecca, Muhammad is believed to have faced significant resistance and hostility. As a result, he immigrated to Medina where he was more warmly received and was able to continue his mission. It is within, and following, this phase that the Islamic conquests began and continued. These missions were comprised of a number of battles that saw the rapid expansion, and periodic consolidation, of the Islamic empire under successive caliphates. It goes without saying that these wars involved violence, in addition to the submission of other peoples to Islamic rule.

The impact of the creation of this divisive mindset was highlighted in a report issued by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs in September 2015. Titled "The Basic Philosophy and Religious References of Daesh," the report denounces political Salafism, specifically that espoused and practiced by ISIS. At one point, speaking more generally, the report explains:

Decontextualizing religious references and perceiving them as direct articles of law, having only nominal and literal connections with the Holy Quran and virtual and formal connections with Sunnah, rejecting reason and abilities bestowed upon mankind by Allah and pitting them against divine inspiration, this mentality has marginalized all other Muslims throughout history in order to monopolize the interpretation of [Sunnism] which represents mainstream Islam.<sup>24</sup>

For most Muslims today, there is an implicit consensus that such periods of war within Islamic theology are affixed to their historical contexts. What was relevant to the establishment and expansion of a religious world order then is understood as irrelevant, and impractical, in the modern world. Islamist extremists, however, are motivated by a worldview that continues to borrow from these specific periods, romanticizing them in an attempt to appeal to disaffected Muslims seeking out an alternative, more authentic religious identity.

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<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey Takes on the Islamic State...in a 40-page Report," *Al-Monitor*, September 2, 2015.

For those from conservative backgrounds, the ideologies espoused by Islamist extremists communicate in an already understood religious language while cleverly weaving politics and other grievances into the debate in an attempt to redefine Islamic conservatism. For the impious and the religiously uneducated it provides a clear-cut way of life and religious identity, and alleviates pressures associated with identity formulation.

The following, from conversations with ISIS female foreign fighters, or “jihadi brides” provides a good illustration of the identity-religion nexus:

Almost all the women I came across looked and sounded not unlike myself at 16. They were conservative Muslim girls, whether they were recent converts or the daughters of Muslims, who took their faith seriously. Although their interpretation of Islam rarely agreed with mine, the women I spoke to were driven in part by religious ideals. But few of these women were willing to engage thoughtfully with a variety of Islamic religious texts, traditions and interpretations. They hated disorder and ambiguity; the clear-cut doctrines issued by jihadist ideologues appealed to their political sensibilities. Opposing the west was their measure of religious authenticity.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that the desire to return to and live by some perceived old glory, where the front lines of identity are primarily religious, does not belong to violent extremist groups alone.

In his book *The Great Theft*,<sup>26</sup> law professor Khaled Abou el Fadl explains the regressive effects that puritanical, political Islam has had on the Muslim world. Though not focused exclusively on the conservative Saudi state-religion Wahhabism—one that shares many doctrinal parallels to Salafism—the book highlights the ongoing struggle between varying streams of modern Islamic thought concerning the soul of Islam and the support that puritanical Islam receives from select states.

Though ISIS currently dominates the debate on Islamist extremism, it should not be the yardstick for the ideological depth of the Salafi jihadi movement. While ISIS is only the latest, and arguably most brutal, iteration of the jihadist movement, the organization lies at the end of a long spectrum of political ideologies and theologies that have contributed to its creation.

### **Looking Forward: Points to Consider for the Development of CVE Initiatives**

There is still much to learn about radicalization. States that have implemented CVE initiatives are continually looking for ways to more effectively meet the threat. Others have yet to fully implement programs.

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<sup>25</sup> Nabeelah Jaffer, "The secret world of Isis brides: 'U dnt have 2 pay 4 ANYTHING if u r wife of a martyr," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

The term CVE is slightly misleading, as it implies a focus on violent extremists, specifically individuals who are arguably already engaged in violent activities. In reality, many of the initiatives and programs involve measures aimed at tackling the radicalization process both before individuals adopt violent tactics and at the stage where individuals are deemed ideologically 'radicalized' but not yet violent.

Radicalization poses many challenges, as the process is a private affair, taking place largely within a person's head. Observable signs of radicalization are thus a testament to the advanced nature of the radicalization process, albeit signs by no means suggest that the radicalization is irreversible and/or indicative of violence. Also, some behavioral signs of radicalization are merely signs of increasing piety, absent ties to any extremist organization.

Sadly, extremists have often used mosques as recruitment grounds, making it difficult for parents and those closest to vulnerable persons to discern the nature of heightened religiosity. Further, it is not uncommon for radicals to discourage and demonize communication with parents, understanding the potential negative consequences of effectual familial ties on the success of radicalization.

The ultimate challenge is the inability to determine whether extremist beliefs will turn into violent action. In dealing with the current wave of Western foreign fighters, the voiced intent to travel to a conflict zone or the active support of designated terrorist organizations on social media are rough indicators. Authorities and community-led initiatives have also developed rough indicators relevant to their work. The number and accuracy of these indicators are bound to develop through experience.

In reality, the main idea behind CVE initiatives is to counter extremist ideology, namely to stem radicalization, and to prevent those who have already radicalized from acting upon their violent extremist beliefs. Drawing from the issues identified regarding radicalization and identity in previous sections, the remainder of this essay identifies a number of points to consider when developing CVE programs.

### *Involve Parents and Vulnerable Target Groups*

Communication between parents and children fails when parents are unable to act as an effective point of reference on how to manage in society. Conventional wisdom tells us that adolescence is a period of rebellion and distancing from parents as children attempt to develop their own identities. This process requires a balance of supervision and guidance that parents are sometimes unable to provide.

Parents are arguably the first line of defense because they have the closest contact to vulnerable persons, and thus should be capable of eliciting a unique emotional influence. However, parents are often the last to know that their child has radicalized and/or traveled to a conflict zone.

Numerous newspaper headlines have captured the shock and misery of families who have lost their children or spouses.<sup>27</sup>

Community-level initiatives to counter radicalization cannot succeed without involving parents. First, programs should aim to raise awareness of radicalization and communicate what is known about the process. Subject matter experts and other relevant community figures should be invited to discuss details concerning processes of radicalization, including an overview of Islamist extremist ideology and its various centers of gravity for recruitment. Programs should also look to develop a set of behavioral indicators that can aid parents and community members in the detection of signs of radicalization. While this is not an easy task, programs may benefit from speaking to families of would-be and actual violent extremists in an effort to identify trends.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, parents should be schooled in how to effectively communicate with their children. Equipping parents with knowledge of radicalization should *not* lead to extra constraints being placed on children's freedoms. Rather, programs should aim to educate parents on the necessity of encouraging and fostering open and honest conversation with their children. Family structures organized along traditional patriarchal authority lines that emphasize unquestionable obedience and respect hinder the kind of frank, critical discussions crucial to countering extremist arguments.

Critical thinking is the cornerstone of the globally oriented network Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE). The organization is headquartered in Vienna, Austria, and features field offices in a number of countries, including the US. The network, in its own words, "promotes the role of women in the security sphere and sensitizes mothers in particular to their role and responsibility to challenge violent extremist ideologies."<sup>28</sup> The program raises awareness and provides women, in particular mothers, with skills to recognize and counter extremism in their homes or communities. Initiatives in the US may benefit from a program similar to SAVE, as it has developed several outreach programs in a number of countries with social and political structures comparable to the US. This program, with its focus on women and the role of mothers, is also timely and relevant given the increasing number of women and girls traveling to Syria and Iraq.

That being said, CVE programs should engage the demographic that is most vulnerable to being targeted by Islamist extremist propagandists. The demographics of the most recent wave of foreign fighters from the US and Europe indicates that the target group is younger than in previous conflicts. Thus, CVE efforts should aim to develop interventions that engage the appropriate, relevant at-risk age groups. These interventions should seek to raise awareness of the threat, and equip youngsters with the skills needed to actively be a part of the effort to counter violent extremism, particularly by giving them agency and the opportunity to be part of a good cause.

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Robinson and Steph Cockcroft, "Three sisters who have fled to Syria to join Isis with their nine children had already been stopped from leaving the UK in March," *Daily Mail*, June 17, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Women Without Borders, "Mission Statement".

### *Think Role Models*

Imams and religious laypeople play a crucial role in helping or hindering the fight against Islamist extremism. Imams are the gatekeepers of mosques, and can help prevent the mosque from being used a recruitment ground. Imams also hold considerable authority by virtue of their religious stature, and thus command varying levels of respect from Muslim communities. As such, they cannot be excluded from any serious effort to mobilize the community against radical views peddled in the service of terrorist recruitment.

Imams, however, should not be the cornerstone of CVE efforts. For starters, imams and religious figures that do not agree with the Islamist extremist project are often painted as traitors and supporters of infidel governments. This association aims to tarnish their credibility by portraying them as mouthpieces and agents of an allegedly hostile government.

Even when this is not the case, imams often lack the charismatic rhetoric more commonly associated with jihadi recruiters, and thus are unable to capture the imagination of youth. The “jihadi cool”<sup>29</sup> is successful because it presents a sexy, empowering identity couched in a simple, easy-to-grasp religious rhetoric. Extremist ideologues understand the importance of tailoring messages using the language and social platforms of the target audience. In today's world of social technology, young audiences have grown accustomed to messages being delivered more quickly and concisely. There is no time for elaboration, just a quick explanation.

ISIS has outdone al Qaeda in this realm through creating an almost Hollywood-like propaganda industry. Aside from their customary propaganda videos, the group designs posters for its cause. The Rayat Al-Tawheed (Banner of God) has its own Tumblr account, where it designs posters advocating for ISIS.<sup>30</sup> Mixed with pictures of so-called martyrs who died fighting for ISIS, the group—like al Qaeda before it—propagates new Muslim ideals, chiefly what it means to be a “real” Muslim. The men in the posters, and the martyrs dying for an allegedly holy cause, become role models for those that follow. The themes speak of heroism, religious fervor, and the promise of salvation and reward in the afterlife.

Religious authorities face many challenges to responding effectively and in a similar manner. Their presence online is minimal and thus far they have been unable to respond in a tech-savvy manner that truly rivals that of the extremists. Furthermore, while imams can, and do, have religious credibility within their communities, they do not necessarily hold sway over Muslim youth. This is primarily because imams only speak to the religious aspect of the problem, and do not always do so effectively due to the generational gap in the communication medium.

Recognizing the importance of communication and role models in the recruitment process, any effort to counter Islamist extremism should similarly seek out role models and individuals who “walk the walk and talk the talk,” so to speak. Here, credibility comes from the ability of said persons to relate to the target audience, speak the same language, and be somewhat

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<sup>29</sup> Various experts in the field have used the term to explain the appeal of Islamist militancy. See for example Alison Flood, “Salman Rushdie: Hate-Filled Rhetoric of ‘Jihadi-Cool’ is Persuading British Muslims to Join ISIS,” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Rayat Al Tawheed, “Rayat Al Tawheed: Muhajireen Fighting in Syria,” *Tumblr*.

representative, sharing, for example, the religious, ethnic, and national identities of the target groups. More importantly, role models should be able to lead discussions that resonate with youth by acknowledging the issues afflicting them in their daily lives, and work toward empowering them to opt for peaceful, productive solutions.

At present, this work is being done by individuals across the world. Former extremists who are able to provide insight from firsthand experiences have become increasingly visible in the CVE scene over the past few years. Such individuals often have the credibility of experience, and are usually deeply familiar with extremist narratives and the ideological recruitment processes. They are thus better positioned to provide counter arguments that could help delegitimize the violent extremist cause. Many others have taken up the fight against extremism in creative ways.

One interesting example is that of Humza Arshad, a British Pakistani comedian who challenges the jihadi appeal through comedy. His YouTube channel “Humza Productions” and his standup comedy shows take on the issues of religion, ethnicity, and British identity in a way that highlights the unique—but still very British—identity of local Pakistanis.<sup>31</sup> His series is a combination of seriousness and satire delivered in a language and cultural context that resonates with his fans, also the primary target group for extremist radicalization.

The effectiveness of such an approach has not been measured, but it is welcoming to see more creative efforts from within Muslim communities. Given that the main targets of Islamist extremists are Muslims, the strongest counter-narratives can only emerge from within the same communities.

#### *Cast the Partner Net Further*

When developing CVE programs, the community as a whole is represented via various institutions. Typically, Islamic institutions and mosques are among the most visible community representatives. However, as the previous points indicate, there are many other potential sources for partnership that should be taken into consideration when developing both general and specifically tailored interventions.

Echoing the initial Program on Extremism report on CVE in America, it is important to have variation in the partners selected for CVE efforts.<sup>32</sup> It cannot be stressed enough how heterogeneous the Muslim community—both in the West and globally—is in respect to religious practices, beliefs, and traditions. There is no one voice that represents all Muslims in respect to their views on politics and religion, and this variation should be reflected in the choice of partners.

Further, many institutions that work on behalf of Muslims in the West are rarely, if ever, elected by the Muslim constituencies they claim to represent. For example, a Policy Exchange report studying Muslim representation in the UK cites a poll that shows 51% of Muslims polled

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<sup>31</sup> "Humza Productions," YouTube.

<sup>32</sup> Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Countering Violent Extremism in America*, Program on Extremism, June 2015.

claimed that none of the Islamic institutions present actually represented them.<sup>33</sup> Selecting one or two institutions or organizations to act as the mouthpieces for entire Muslim communities runs the risk of making one political and religious position dominant at the expense of many others.

It is often heard in the field of counterterrorism that “it takes a network to defeat a network.” This saying is similarly true for CVE efforts, as it necessarily involves a network of stakeholders that each has a role to play in stemming radicalization. This includes, but is not limited to, social workers, psychiatrists, subject experts, former extremists from all ideological backgrounds, and the authorities.

#### *Bridge the “Us vs. Them” Gap*

Considering that extremist narratives aim to create societal cleavages between Muslims and the larger community, any CVE program should include an element that counters this effort by instead *bridging* gaps in society. In this regard, interfaith events are the most common approaches to countering the divisive rhetoric of extremists. While such events are necessary to foster dialogue and understanding of religious “others,” they only challenge the religious component of extremist ideologies.

The Islamist extremist master narrative is intimately tied to a political discourse that demonizes the state and its representatives. There are many reasons for this, ranging from encouraging Muslims to switch allegiance to an imagined *ummah* (the Muslim community of believers) and the Islamic state project, to hindering much needed cooperation with authorities in their efforts to crack down on extremist elements. This poses obvious problems to CVE efforts, as it creates resistance to attempts to establish dialogue and find solutions.

It is often heard, at least in Western CVE circles and literature, that government-led initiatives lack credibility, and are therefore treated with mixed doses of suspicion and skepticism, a troublesome contention by itself. Civil society organizations and NGOs are best suited to respond to community-level problems, as they are less constrained than government bureaucracies. That being said, these organizations should not act as buffers between communities and authorities, but rather as intermediaries and connectors. Understanding that extremist narratives aim to cast suspicion on government intentions toward Muslim communities, one of the goals of CVE programs should be to counter such perceptions through strengthening relations between communities and the government.

The Maryland-based World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE) frequently holds intercultural community events that bring together community members and local and federal government officials. By doing so, the organization strengthens ties between communities and authorities, and enables all those involved to openly discuss issues of relevance.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, such activities help challenge extremist narratives that demonize

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<sup>33</sup> Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups*, Policy Exchange, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> See for example World Organization for Resource Development and Education [WORDE], "DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson Meeting with the Montgomery County Executive's Faith Community Working Group (FCWG)," July 16, 2015.

authorities, helping engender trust and a culture of collaboration among stakeholders that are crucial to successful CVE efforts.

### *Develop Ideological Counter-Argumentation*

The development of argumentation to counter extremist ideology is perhaps one of the most important elements of CVE today. In developing such argumentation, two points should be taken into consideration. First, Islamist extremist narratives depend on successfully blending religious identity and politics, identity politics at its finest. The argument presented by Islamist extremists, broadly speaking, is that one cannot be Muslim without identifying with every other Muslim in the world. Belonging to a larger *ummah* is not merely a matter of sharing a religious affinity, but concerning oneself with the woes of Muslims worldwide. This concern cannot manifest itself simply as passive acceptance of Muslim suffering worldwide, but involves varying levels of activism against those that are allegedly intentionally inflicting such pain on Muslims solely because they are Muslim.

Second, Islamist extremists are representative of a wider spectrum of movements that together advocate the realization of specific goals. These goals are the outcome of a well-constructed political ideology that rests on an elaborate religious worldview. It is not simply a matter of selectively choosing religious scripture to justify political means. As much as many Muslims worldwide may disagree with their worldview, the Islamist extremism the world currently faces by the world is a contemporary Islamic theology of sorts whose intellectual underpinnings can be found in puritanical strains of Islam practiced on many continents.

Developing argumentation to counter extremism should thus aim at achieving two things. First, it should seek to develop a counter-narrative that challenges the political rhetoric of Islamist extremist ideology. This can be done in many ways, including by challenging the hypocrisy of the Islamist extremist project by highlighting that while their envisioned states are meant as safe havens for Muslims, the overwhelming majority of their victims are Muslims.<sup>35</sup> It is necessary to uncouple the political from the religious. Expressing political dissent and voicing disagreement with specific state policies is a protected right in most advanced democratic societies, and certainly not a reality in any Islamist-controlled territory. There are a number of ways in which the political incompetence, hypocrisy, and religious transgression of state and non-state entities that exercise similar puritanical religious rule could be discredited from a purely political perspective.

Second, and finally, in addition to a counter-narrative, it is necessary to develop a counter-theology to challenge the puritanical interpretations and religious convictions that underpin Islamist extremism. This responsibility falls primarily to Islamic scholars, and should be developed in parallel with the political counter-narrative with the aim of developing a comprehensive counter-argumentation to Islamist extremist ideology.

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<sup>35</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *The New Jihadism: A Global Snapshot*, London, UK, ICSR, 2014.